THE ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES OF THE CURT VALENTIN AND BUCHHOLZ GALLERIES

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
21 Bateman Street
Cambridge CB2 1NB
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck, NJ 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1977

Series: The purpose of this series is to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers.

Serial numbers: Each title is identified by a three-part serial number. The first part of the serial number designates the sales list in which the title was first announced. The second part indicates the agent of publication, i.e. the museum, gallery or organisation that was responsible for the publication of the catalogue. The third part of the serial number is the number allotted to that title.

Copyright, microfiche edition: Estate of Curt Valentin and Chadwyck-Healey Ltd, 1977.

Location of original: The National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.

Technical data:

Producing laboratory: Micromedia Ltd, Bicester, Oxfordshire, England.

List 14

THE SCULPTURE OF

David Smith

JANUARY 2-26, 1946

BUCHHOLZ GALLERY

CURT VALENTIN

WILLARD GALLERY

32 EAST 57TH STREET · NEW YORK

LIBRARY

DAVID SMITH *was born in Decatur, Indiana, in 1906. Studied at the Art Students' League, followed by a year's study and travel in Europe. Lives at Bolton Landing, New York.*

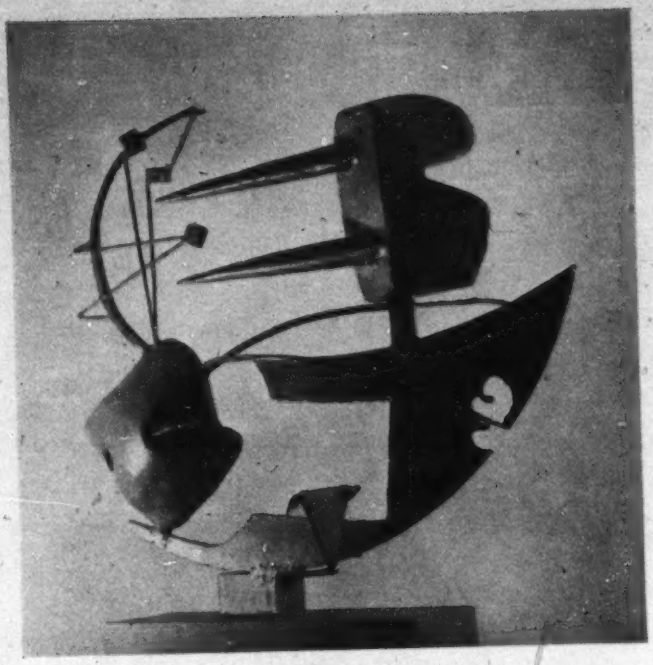
7.II.46.

David Smith

BY W. R. VALENTINER

One sometimes wishes that American sculpture had developed further in the direction to which early folk art pointed, instead of vieing with a complex European tradition, that of an old and highly cultivated society. The masters of folk art, like those who made ship figure-heads and weathervanes, had fundamental knowledge of the material they used, material such as wood and iron which could be found in their own land. When it was a question of marble or bronze sculptures, the early American artist was dependent upon imported material and the technical skill of foreign workmen. This technical ability resulted in a very un-American virtuosity, exhibited in imitations of European styles, during the classic, romantic and impressionistic periods; sculptures were produced whose content was understandable only to a small group of intellectuals who had traveled in Europe, but who knew as little of the spiritual needs of the American masses as the sculptors who lived abroad. As a consequence of divergent influences from Italy, France and England, the trends in sculpture ended, in the twentieth century, in an indescribable confusion of which some of the large exhibitions of American sculpture during recent years have given striking illustration.

If sculpture was to become again a sincere expression of the time and of the character of the people, it had to start anew from the simplest beginnings. Not only a new technique, but also a new content had to be found. For no new technique has value in itself unless it expresses a profound experience of life. To imbue the new forms with spiritual elements is for that reason such a difficult task, because in our machine-loving age the discovery of new techniques has been far in advance of a spiritual development in the arts.



Ad Mare. 1939

CATALOGUE NO. 9

David Smith is one of the few American sculptors to whom the new idea is as important as the new form.

He has worked in many different materials, but most characteristic is his use of fabricated steel plates, of which he learned the qualities through work in war factories. It is the kind of material by which we are surrounded, such as in modern conveyances, equipment and household utensils, but which has been generally used only for mechanical, not for artistic, purposes. It is not easy to adapt it to pure sculpture, because two-dimensional plates have in themselves no plastic value. The forms must be cut out, the plates must be welded together in such a way that they point in different directions or shift one behind the other, thus creating the impression of space. Like all good sculpture they must be filled with vital energy producing the sensation of movement in one or in many directions.

The importance of the silhouette was realized by the makers of early iron weathervanes, but these craftsmen did not unfold the pattern into three-dimensional space, since they depended upon the wind which turned the vanes in different directions like a mobile. Excellent examples of a three-dimensional conception developed from flat steel plates are the "Pillar of Sunday" and the "Cockfight," while the expression of speed in a single direction successfully replaces the idea of static volume in such works as the "Spectre of War" or the "False Peace Spectre."

A different three-dimensional effect is created by a group of monumental abstract sculptures meant to be placed out of doors. They are made of steel plates welded together into compact cubic forms with straight or curved outlines. The silhouette of these powerful compositions is usually closed, but within that framework an intense struggle of forces takes place, which holds us in suspense. As in the motors of modern machinery, the various powers are evenly balanced, curved forms interchange with straight ones, pointed with blunt ones. By walking around these sculptures, which are intended to be seen from all sides, the masses appear to be constantly shifting, revealing new views of exploding energy, of which parts seem to break through the frame unexpectedly, as if darting into space.

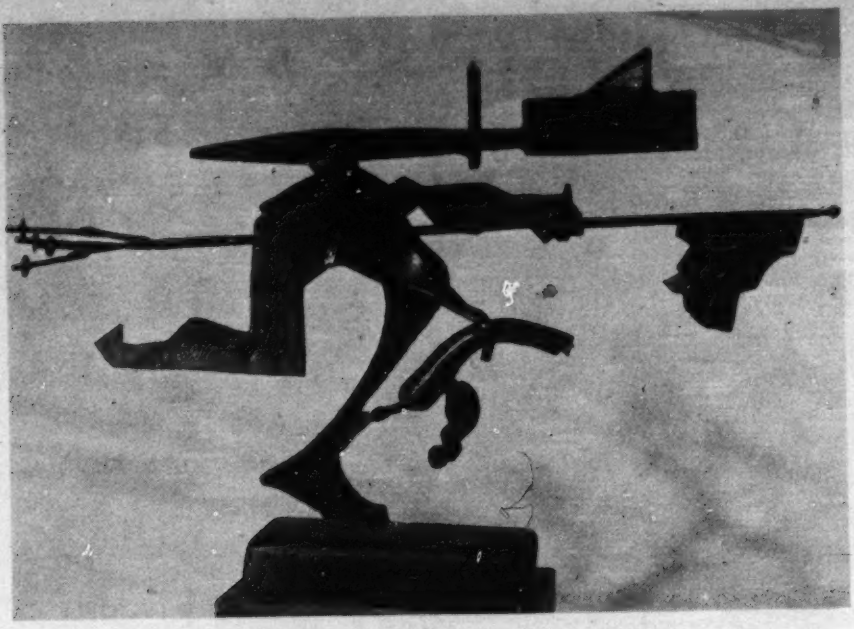
Again another technique is employed in those sculptures which the artist calls "classic figures." They are cast in bronze from models in wood which the artist himself cuts as separate sections. The individual forms are full and rounded, enclosing open spaces which are carefully balanced with the closed ones, and they suggest human figures in the first stage of development out of earthy forms. Sometimes the two techniques of steel plates and of bronze casts are combined, as in the "Reliquary House," giving a variety of sharp and angular and of soft and curved forms, and providing varied surface texture.

* * *

David Smith's first success was based, to a considerable extent, upon his "Medals for Dishonor," anti-war compositions of great individuality

Leda. 1939

CATALOGUE
NO. 12



War Spectre. 1944-45

CATALOGUE NO. 25

and force. In this connection it has been said of him that an artist ought not to concern himself with political problems; yet why should not the artist, with his deep insight, stress human values, especially in times when political propaganda emphasizes the opposite? Only the artist who stands in the midst of life and participates in the struggle that concerns us all can become a moral force, as in former ages when sculpture was an important influence upon the development of ethics. It is an encouraging sign that precisely the younger generation is captured by the new symbolism represented in the works of David Smith and of painters of similar tendencies, that it understands the meaning of that symbolism more easily than do those who grew up with a humanistic education. What the present generation longs for is the statement of its own problems, its own sorrows and joys, communicated in the direct manner of an understanding friend.

Perfidious Albion.
1944-45

CATALOGUE
NO. 38

Cockfight – Variations.
1944-45

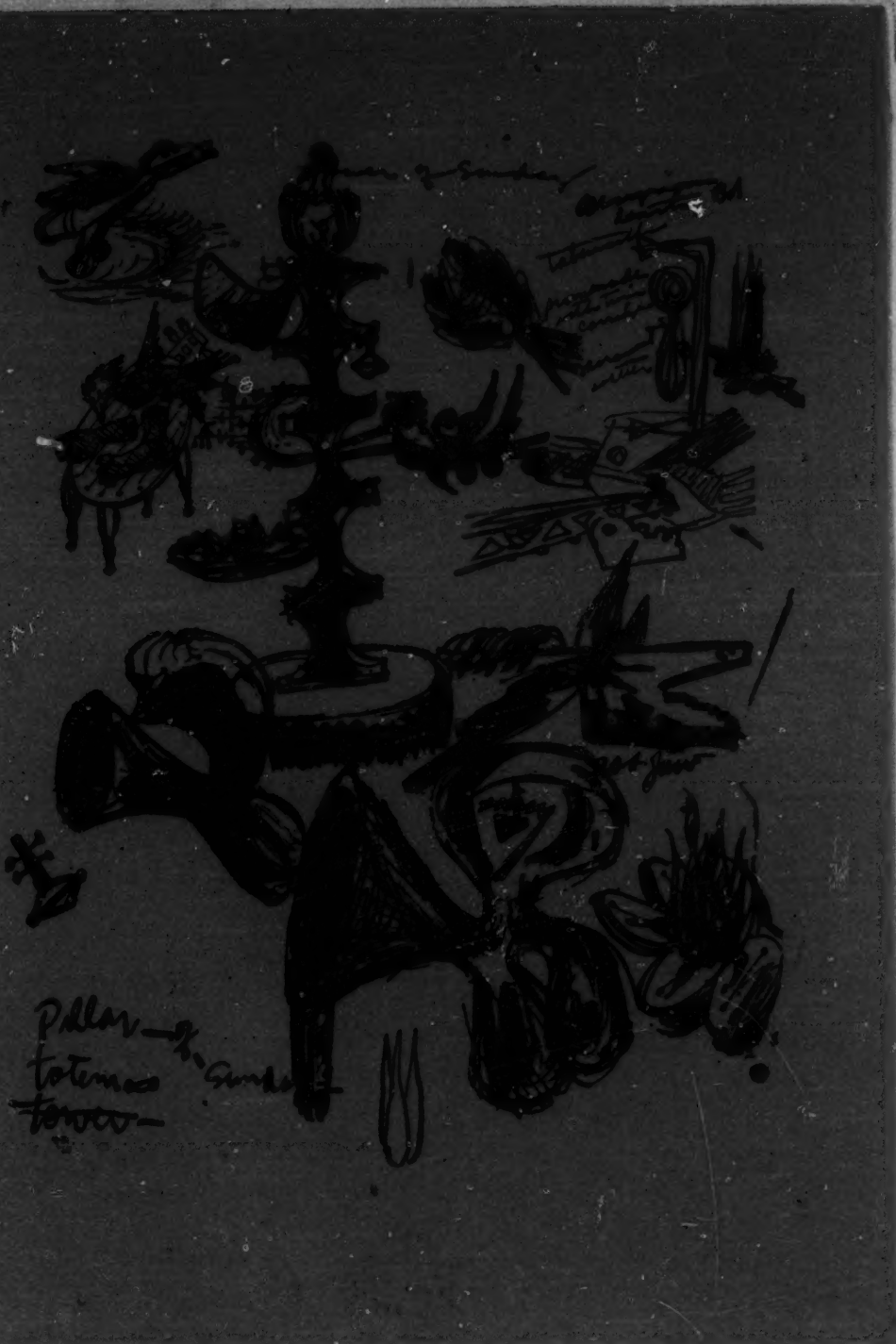
CATALOGUE
NO. 49

No scholarly preparation is needed to comprehend the horrible vision "Spectre of War"—a spectre that haunts us yet—a headless monster composed of steel and weapons, rushing along with passionate fury. And affinity with the artist's feelings will certainly be evoked by the "False Peace Spectre," a strange creature, once beautiful, but now, with torn-out feathers, fallen to ugliness.

But in most of his recent works, the artist has turned away from war obsessions. His symbolism is directed towards nature and the peaceful pursuits of men. He is absorbed with formations of growth in plants and trees, with work and pleasure in the workman's life, with folk traditions and especially with the idea of the house: the sculptor tells us of the bare structure of houses, in which outside and inside are still exchangeable, of the finished and yet open house in its relation to landscape and cosmos, of the "Reliquary House," which is shut off from the world, and of the "House of the Welder" where everything is related to the owner's work—all conceptions rarely ever illustrated by sculptors, except perhaps in primitive periods when people struggled with the same fundamental problems as does the modern workman today, after two world wars.

Those who expect from art loveliness and charm instead of strength and character, those who are sensitive to sharp metal corners and rough surfaces, should keep away from David Smith's plastic works. For his art is harsh and intense and, since it is young and new, sometimes still awkward and heavy. But in its earnestness and directness, it has qualities that seem peculiarly American, such as we admire in Winslow Homer's and Marsden Hartley's paintings. At the same time, David Smith's art believes in the demands of its own epoch, in the creation of new symbols and a potent reconstruction of life. It has what Chirico once described as the greatest need of the art of our time, "faith in ourselves, so that the revelations we receive, the conception of an image which embraces a certain thing which means 'absolutely nothing' from the logical point of view, should speak so strongly in us, evoke such agony and joy, that we are compelled to express it in art."

VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM LIBRARY


Pillar — X
totems
tomb —